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ABSTRACT

This report describes activities and accomplishments of the Federal Communications Commission's Disabilities Issues Task Force on disabilities issues from March 1995 through April 1996, its first year. Introductory material includes a message from the chairman of the Commission and a statement of the Task Force's purpose, which is to address issues concerning access to information and the media for people with disabilities. The next section summarizes relevant aspects of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The following section summarizes major efforts of the year, including launching of the Task Force, low power radio service rulemaking, identification of the "top ten" activities for the Commission to improve access, a ruling that Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) providers must offer access to optional and discount calling plans, TRS and coin sent paid services, formation of Task Force working groups, public notice on captioning of commission meetings, the universal design forum, the emergency alert system access meeting, rulemaking on hearing aid compatibility, a symposium on captioning, a summit meeting on wireless hearing aid compatibility, and the American Foundation for the Blind honors. Continuing and future Task Force initiatives are also identified, including creating a disabilities World Wide Web home page, improving TRS, and improving accessibility of the FCC. (DB)

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ED 425 566

Federal Communications Commission

BUILDING BRIDGES

TO THE

INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY:

Annual Report of the Disabilities Issues Task Force

Federal Communications Commission

(March 1995 - April 1996)

April 26, 1996

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A Message from the Chairman

Each day, many of us listen to the radio, fax a document, place dozens of phone calls, surf the Internet, and watch several hours of television. These services have become so much a part of our society that we cannot imagine life without them. In fact, most of us could not perform our jobs without them.

But we must never forget that there are millions of Americans who cannot fully enjoy these services, because of vision, hearing, mobility and other disabilities. These citizens are no less entitled than other Americans to share in the benefits of the Information Age.

That is why, in March of 1995, the Federal Communications Commission set out on a new mission, and created the Disabilities Issues Task Force.

Our nation is rapidly becoming an information society, and new digital technologies are changing the face of our communications infrastructure. The new Telecommunications Act of 1996 has completely re-tooled the way in which our country will obtain and use its telecommunication services. The Disabilities Issues Task Force is one of the most powerful tools we have at the Commission to ensure that we do not become a society of information haves and have-nots.

This Annual Report describes some of the accomplishments we've achieved in our very first year. And this is just the beginning. In the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Congress directed the FCC to continue on this course, and to ensure that telecommunications equipment and services are accessible to people with disabilities.

The experience of people with disabilities in American society has profound lessons for all of us. The opportunities of the communications revolution are limitless; and there should be no limits placed on those opportunities.

Reed E. Hundt

TO BOLDLY GO WHERE NO TASK FORCE HAS GONE BEFORE

At the Federal Communications Commission, we are committed to expanding the universe of accessible communications for people with disabilities.

In this past year as Director of the Task Force, I've met hundreds of people with disabilities at various conferences, symposiums, and outreach events who tell me their personal stories about how the Internet, telecommunications relay services, closed-captioning, hearing aid compatible telephones, and telephones with volume controls have enhanced the quality of their lives. By promoting access for people with disabilities, we are empowering millions of Americans who would otherwise be shut out of an information society.

Our Disabilities Issues Task Force traverses all lanes of the information superhighway - wireless, mass media, telephony, cable, international, enforcement and consumer education. Working with every Bureau and Office of the Commission, we ensure that all of our policies and rules will include access for people with disabilities wherever possible. Through contact with consumers and the telecommunications industry, the FCC is responsive to the concerns of people with disabilities. As you can see from this Annual Report, we have had a productive first year. The Task Force members have worked day and night to accomplish these initiatives, and I would like to express my gratitude to them for their dedication. It's a honor to work with such a fine group of talented, committed individuals.

Why do we work so hard for disability access? Is it because it's the right thing to do? Yes, that's one reason. But disability access policies also promote economic growth and competition in our economy. There are 50 million Americans with disabilities who will purchase and use telecommunications equipment and services if they are designed to be accessible from the design stage. The market demand for captioned television is unquestionable. People with disabilities form a powerful consumer market that the highly competitive telecommunications industry just can't afford to ignore. Accessible telecommunications also translates into educational and employment opportunities - empowerment - for people with disabilities.

Years of working to establish and improve Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS), and working on other disability access issues at the FCC, have convinced me of one thing: people with disabilities are the best judges of what works for them. As we enter our second year, we look forward to continuing to work closely with the disability community, especially as we move to implement the historic disability access mandates of the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

Linda B. Dubroof
Director, Disabilities Issues Task Force

BACKGROUND

The FCC Disabilities Issues Task Force (DITF) was created in March 1995 by FCC Chairman Reed Hundt. The DITF is an internal, FCC-wide Task Force with representatives from every Bureau and Office. The DITF is dedicated to ensuring that people with disabilities, to the greatest extent possible, will be able to access telecommunications equipment and services in the Information Age.

The DITF has many roles:

- it serves as a single point of coordination and communication for all disability-related issues, in all areas of telecommunications regulated by the Commission;
- it advises the Chairman, Commissioners and other FCC officials on disability access issues;
- it educates FCC staff about the need to include disability access, wherever possible, in all Commission initiatives; and
- it works with Bureau and Office staff on rulemakings and in identifying the potential impact of proposed rules on people with disabilities.

In its first year of operation, however, the DITF found that its most important role was as a "bridge-builder" between the telecommunications industry and people with disabilities. The DITF reached out to both industry and consumers, and sought to bring former adversaries into forums where disputes could be resolved without the need for extended rulemakings. This proactive, consensus-oriented approach is highly effective in today's fast-paced and competitive telecommunications environment. This approach also has significant long-term benefits, because it provides consumers with disabilities and the industry with the opportunity to form strategic alliances.

THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACT OF 1996

On February 8, 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104-104 (1996 Act). This legislation represents the most sweeping overhaul of American telecommunications law since the Communications Act of 1934.

In the 1996 Act, Congress reaffirmed the goals and purpose of the Disabilities Issues Task Force, and gave the Commission several specific mandates designed to enhance accessibility of the information infrastructure to Americans with disabilities.

Section 255 of the 1996 Act requires all manufacturers of telecommunications equipment and customer premises equipment (CPE) to ensure that their equipment is

designed to be accessible to individuals with disabilities, if readily achievable. Section 255 also requires providers of telecommunications services to ensure that their services are accessible to and usable by people with disabilities, if readily achievable. Manufacturers and service providers are also required to ensure that their equipment and services are compatible with peripheral devices commonly used by people with disabilities (i.e., TTYs and screen readers), if direct access is not readily achievable.

The 1996 Act also contains a historic mandate requiring providers of video programming to ensure that their programming is accessible to people with hearing and vision disabilities. Section 713 of the Act requires the Commission to report to Congress on the current availability of closed-captioned video programming, and to develop regulations promoting closed-captioning within 18 months of enactment of the 1996 Act. The Commission is also directed to conduct a study on the use of video description services for people with visual disabilities.

The DITF has taken a lead role in implementing the disability access sections of the 1996 Act. The Wireless Telecommunications Bureau (WTB) has primary responsibility for the implementation of Section 255, and WTB staffers have been working closely with DITF members and staff from the Common Carrier Bureau and the Office of Engineering and Technology. The Commission will be coordinating its efforts with those of the U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (Access Board) in developing equipment accessibility regulations, and the Commission will also initiate proceedings on accessible equipment and services in the summer of 1996.

The Cable Services and Mass Media Bureaus have also worked closely with the DITF as they implement the video programming requirements of the 1996 Act. In fact, in anticipation of the new video programming requirements, the DITF coordinated, with the Mass Media Bureau, the release of a historic Notice of Inquiry on closed-captioning and video description in December 1995. This Notice of Inquiry has now become the basis of the Commission's implementation of Section 713.

THE YEAR IN REVIEW: MARCH 1995 - APRIL 1996

Disabilities Issues Task Force launched, March 1995

In March 1995, Chairman Hundt officially established the Disabilities Issues Task Force, and named himself to serve as Disabilities Issues Commissioner. Speaking before the American Foundation for the Blind in Washington, D.C., Chairman Hundt remarked:

> The Task Force will serve as a monitor and educator, ensuring that the interests and needs of the disability community are represented at the Commission and in industry. It will ensure a vigorous exchange of information from the disability community to the Bureaus, and vice versa. Working together, we can ensure that everyone has access to the information highway.

Karen Brinkmann, then Special Assistant to Chairman Hundt (now Associate Chief,

Wireless Telecommunications Bureau), was named the Acting Director of the Task Force.

In March, DITF representatives toured the AT & T "Tech Center of the Future," and visited several telecommunications relay service (TRS) centers, to get an up-close understanding of how telecommunications services and equipment can be designed to be accessible to people with disabilities.

Low power radio service rulemaking, April 1995

The electromagnetic spectrum is a valuable national resource, and individuals with disabilities have a vested interest in Federal spectrum policies. One example of this interest is in the use of assistive listening devices (ALDs), also referred to as auditory assistance devices (AADs). ALDs are used by individuals with hearing disabilities to enhance their ability to hear spoken speech in public settings such as theaters and lecture halls. Some types of ALDs use radio frequencies to amplify and transmit sound to the user.

As the radio spectrum becomes increasingly crowded, users of ALDs are finding that sometimes these devices may be rendered useless by interference from other wireless systems. Many ALDs which use the radio spectrum currently operate in the general 72 - 76 megahertz (MHz) band. These devices are currently used on an unlicensed basis.

The FCC is acutely aware of the potential for interference with ALDs. In April of 1995, the Commission released a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking which proposes to create a new Low Power Radio Service that would include assistive listening devices. This NPRM proposes to allocate 30 new channels on a licensed basis, and the operation of these channels would be on a secondary, non-interference basis. Licensees would be required to cooperate in the selection of frequencies in order to reduce interference.

"Top Ten List," June 1995

Delivering the keynote address at the Eleventh Annual Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc. (TDI) Convention in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Chairman Hundt announced a "Top Ten List" of activities which the Commission could do to facilitate access to the Information Superhighway for people with disabilities:

1. Require closed-captioning and video description for all television and cable programming.

2. Require cellular and Personal Communications Service (PCS) equipment to be hearing aid compatible.

3. Expand mandatory minimum Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) standards

by:

(a) Requiring CAs (communications assistants) to relay in specifically requested foreign languages;

(b) Requiring TTY and Telebraille equipment distribution programs;

(c) Requiring speech-to-speech and video relay services.

4. Modify Part 68 of the Commission's rules to require volume control on all wireline telephones.

5. Assign permanent, exclusive frequencies for assistive listening devices.

6. Ensure that N11 Codes are assigned to access TRS.

7. Modify Part 68 of the Commission's rules to require permanent labelling on all wireline telephones to identify that they are hearing aid compatible.

8. Conduct a study to determine whether the Commission's regulations ensure that advances in network services are accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities.

9. Ensure that all televised Commission meeting and publicly sponsored Commission events are closed-captioned, and provide all Commission publications in alternative formats, including braille, enlarged text and audio text.

10. Hold an "Access 2000" Summit with persons with disabilities, industry leaders and government regulators to develop an agenda for action for the next five years.

Common Carrier Bureau finds that Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) providers must offer access to optional and discount calling plans, June 1995

Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) provides access to the voice telephone network for Americans with hearing and speech disabilities. Required by Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), TRS is currently offered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The DITF places a high priority on the Commission's oversight of the TRS program, which is one of the fastest- growing segments of the telecommunications industry.

On June 9, 1995, the Common Carrier Bureau released a Memorandum Opinion and Order in response to a complaint that the State of Arkansas' TRS program was not in compliance with the Commission's rules, because it failed to offer access to optional and discount calling plans and directory assistance services which were provided by local

carriers. The Commission's Order held that TRS providers must provide access to such optional plans and directory assistance services, and found the Arkansas program to be in non-compliance. This Order confirmed the Commission's and the Disabilities Issues Task Force's strong belief that TRS must provide the greatest possible level of "functional equivalence" to the public telephone network, both in the types of services provided and in the rates charged for such services.

Miss America 1995 Heather Whitestone visits FCC to celebrate the 2nd Anniversary of Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS), July 1995

On July 26, 1995, Miss America 1995 Heather Whitestone, the nation's first Miss America with a disability, visited the FCC. Ms. Whitestone and Chairman Hundt joined together in the Commission Meeting Room to commemorate the 5th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the 2nd Anniversary of TRS services, which were required by Title IV of the ADA to be established on or before July 26, 1993. Ms. Whitestone and Chairman Hundt also participated in a live TRS call, to demonstrate to the public how easy TRS is to use, and how TRS provides access to Americans with hearing and speech disabilities.

Also in July, Linda Dubroof, Deputy Chief of the Network Services Division, Common Carrier Bureau was named permanent Director of the Task Force. Linda's duties at the Network Services Division (formerly Domestic Facilities Division) included the development of the Commission's TRS rules, and the implementation of the Hearing Aid Compatibility Act of 1988 (HAC Act).

Common Carrier Bureau Adopts Order outlining interim plan for access to coin sent-paid service through TRS, August 1995

The Commission's rules for the provision of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) require TRS providers to be capable of handling any type of call normally provided to voice telephone users, including coin sent-paid calls (such as calls made by depositing coins in a public telephone). Because of technical difficulties, the Commission initially suspended enforcement of the coin sent-paid requirement for two years, until July 26, 1995.

As the end of the two-year suspension neared, industry representatives indicated that they still had no feasible solutions to the coin sent-paid problem. Industry representatives and representatives of consumers with hearing and speech disabilities, accordingly, presented an interim plan to the Commission which was adopted in an Order on August 26, 1995. The Order suspends the coin sent-paid rules for another two years, until August 26, 1997, and directs carriers and TRS providers to implement an interim plan. The interim plan provides TRS users with access to pay phones during the suspension through the following means: (1) local TRS pay phone calls are to be

provided free of charge; (2) toll TRS payphone calls are to be chargeable to calling cards and prepaid cards; and (3) the industry will provide outreach and education to TRS users about these interim payment methods. The industry will also present 12-month and 18-month status reports to the Commission. This ongoing process provides an example of how the industry and consumers can work together, in consultation with the Commission, to resolve accessibility problems without having to resort to adversarial proceedings.

Nine Working Groups formed to implement Top Ten List, September 1995

In September 1995, the DITF formed nine Working Groups. Each Working Group addresses a particular area of the telecommunications industry or Commission operations, and is assigned the duty of completing any Top Ten items which fall within its purview. The original nine Working Groups are:

- Accessibility of the FCC
- Assistive Listening Devices
- Closed-Captioning & Video Description
- Emergency Alert System (EAS)
- Hearing Aid Compatibility
- Public Affairs/Access 2000
- Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS)
- Universal Design
- Video/Handbook Education Project

Also, in February 1996, an ad hoc Working Group, the Telecommunications Act Working Group, was formed, and consists of DITF members working directly on rulemakings to implement the disability access sections of the 1996 Act.

Public Notice on captioning of FCC events, October 1995

The Commission has recognized that if it is to expect the entities which it regulates to comply with any accessibility standards, the Commission itself must take steps to ensure that its own internal processes and facilities are accessible to persons with disabilities. In the past year, the Accessibility Working Group has made great inroads into improving overall FCC accessibility.

In a Public Notice released October 12, 1995, the Commision announced that all of its open meetings would be closed-captioned. Chairman Hundt echoed the goals of the DITF in this Public Notice, stating "It is important that the Commission not only develop policies that ensure that communications serves all Americans, including those with disabilities, but that we follow our own policy advice by making our public meetings available to the segment of the public with hearing disabilities." The Commission has

also taken steps to ensure that sign language interpreters are provided for Commission meetings and special events.

Chairman Hundt Addresses World Institute on Disability (WID)/Trace Center/WGBH- Boston Forum on Universal Design, U.S. Department of Commerce, October 1995

The rapid pace of development in the telecommunications industry renders traditional forms of enforcement (i.e., filing complaints) impractical. By the time telecommunications equipment or new services reach consumers, accessibility cannot be "retrofitted" into the equipment or services without great expense.

Before the enactment of the 1996 Act, the disability community, the telecommunications industry and the Commission conducted ongoing, collaborative processes to ensure that telecommunications equipment and services are accessible to the greatest number of users, disabled and not disabled, from the design and manufacturing stage. This concept of "universal design" is changing the way in which the industry and the Commission view issues of disability access to telecommunications. In February 1996, Congress and the President embraced the principle of universal design and codified it into law, in Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

Chairman Hundt delivered remarks at the WID/Trace Center/WGBH-Boston Universal Design Forum at the U.S. Department of Commerce, stating, among other things, that:

> ***One of the Task Force's most important objectives is to urge companies to get it right at the design stage. That is, we want to educate companies to the necessity, and to the social and financial benefits of universal design right from the start. . . . Including universal access principles during the design phase avoids costly retrofitting or expensive auxiliary devices. It permits persons with disabilities to take full advantage of advances in technology and services such as PCS, the Internet, e-mail and electronic banking.***

Cable industry representatives meet with disability community and DITF representatives to resolve issues regarding the Emergency Alert System (EAS), October 1995

The Commission is currently undertaking proceedings to replace the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS), which was established in 1963 by President Kennedy, with the new Emergency Alert System (EAS). EAS is a national system which is used to deliver emergency messages through television broadcasts and cable systems. EAS can be used

to provide nationwide early-warning of national emergencies, and can also be used by regional, State, county, and local authorities to provide emergency information to specific communities.

As with other emergency services, the Commission recognizes that it is essential to ensure that EAS is accessible to persons with disabilities. In October of 1995, therefore, the DITF and Commission staff from the Cable Services and Compliance and Information Bureaus organized a meeting between cable industry representatives and representatives of people with hearing disabilities, so that technical issues regarding EAS access could be discussed among the parties. Having all parties sit at the same table was a crucial step towards a proactive resolution, and the Commission is confident that a consensus solution to some difficult accessibility issues posed by EAS will be reached in the near future.

Commission completes negotiated rulemaking and releases Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on wireline hearing aid compatibility and volume control, November 1995

The Hearing Aid Compatibility Act of 1988 (HAC Act) requires the FCC to take steps to ensure that all essential wireline telephones are compatible with hearing aids. The HAC Act also requires that all telephones manufactured or imported for use in the U.S. after August, 1989 must be hearing aid compatible.

The Commission has implemented most of the HAC Act. Commission regulations which would have required all workplace telephones, telephones in confined settings (i.e., hospitals and nursing homes), and hotel and motel telephones, however, were suspended in April 1993 by the Commission. This action was taken in light of mounting protests from various industry representatives.

In 1995, the Common Carrier Bureau formed a nineteen-member Hearing Aid Compatibility Negotiated Rulemaking Committee to resolve this controversy. Members of this Committee were selected from the telecommunications industry, other industries affected by the rules, and representatives of consumers with hearing and speech disabilities, to ensure that all interested parties were represented in this proceeding. After an intense negotiating schedule, the Committee reached full consensus on all work items and presented its Report to the Commission in August of 1995, recommending rules to replace the suspended rules. The Committee also recommended that the Commission explore the feasibility of requiring all telephones manufactured or imported for use in the U.S. to contain volume controls. In November 1995, the Commission released a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking adopting the recommendations of the Committee.

The success of the HAC Negotiated Rulemaking Committee represents the type of collaborative approach which is becoming the most effective means of resolving accessibility issues in the Information Age. Former adversaries - who had fought over these rules long and hard for nearly fifteen years - were able to come to the bargaining table and reach agreement on solutions to this controversial issue.

Chairman Hundt addresses Captioning: The New Frontier symposium at the Lighthouse, New York City, December 1995

Video programming is perhaps our nation's most powerful and most pervasive communications medium. For many years, the Commission has recognized the value that closed-captioning provides for television viewers with hearing disabilities. In 1976, the Commission adopted rules providing that Line 21 of the Vertical Blanking Interval (VBI) of the television signal would be primarily used for the transmission of closed-captions. In 1991, to implement the Television Decoder Circuitry Act of 1990, the Commission adopted regulations requiring that all televisions manufactured or imported for use in the U.S. with screens of over 13 inches must contain internal circuitry for decoding closed-captions.

The Commission has also long recognized the tremendous market demand for captioned video programming, not only among people with hearing and speech disabilities, but also as an educational tool for improving child and adult literacy, and a tool for learners of English as a second language. The Commission has also recognized that closed-captioning has many other ancillary benefits, i.e., it allows for the viewing of television in noisy environments, and it allows older Americans who are losing their hearing to continue their enjoyment of television. The Commission has also been studying the provision of video descriptions for people with visual impairments, a technique which uses the Second Audio Program (SAP) channel to insert narrative descriptions of actions occurring on the television screen in the natural pauses of the program dialogue.

Video programming in the twenty-first century will truly be a new frontier of possibility and growth. New technologies, such as Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) and advanced digital television (ATV) hold great promise, and we are also witnessing the convergence of cable, telephony and computer technology into one integrated video-voice-data medium. One of the primary goals of the Disabilities Issues Task Force is to ensure that people with disabilities are not denied access to new video technologies. In this spirit, Chairman Hundt addressed a WGBH-Boston/U.S. Department of Education symposium on closed-captioning in December 1995, in New York City entitled Captioning: The New Frontier. Chairman Hundt announced the release of a Notice of Inquiry on closed-captioning and video description, and stated:

> ***The public interest, which is the guiding principle of the FCC, requires equal access to the information superhighway for all Americans. We have no higher responsibility, and no greater calling, than making sure people with disabilities share in the communications revolution. . . .Through forging cooperation between public and private interests, we can ensure that all of us have the ability to travel the information superhighway as it leads to the New Frontier.***

Chairman Hundt and Wireless Telecommunications Bureau Chief Michelle Farquhar open a two-day Summit meeting between the wireless industry and consumers with hearing disabilities, January 1996

Personal Communications Services (PCS) represent the next generation of wireless communications. As opposed to traditional analog cellular telephones, PCS systems can utilize digital transmission methods to deliver a variety of services through the electromagnetic spectrum, including voice telephony, paging, and voice mail. PCS services are the latest step in the continuing shift from "point-to-point" communications to true "person-to-person" communications. The Commission has conducted several auctions of highly coveted radio spectrum for PCS licensees, raising billions of dollars for the U.S. Treasury.

Consumers with hearing disabilities, however, have raised concerns that digital PCS devices create interference problems for hearing aid wearers, both users and bystanders, and are otherwise incompatible with hearing aids. In light of these concerns, the wireless services industry, telecommunications equipment manufacturers, hearing aid manufacturers and consumer groups met at a Summit in Washington, D.C., in January 1996. They formed working groups, which since then have written technical reports evaluating this issue and proposing solutions. Also, the working groups have sponsored a number of tests to better understand this issue. The Commission expects to receive recommendations from the Steering Committee of this joint effort on April 30, 1996.

At the initial Summit meeting in Washington which launched the joint effort, Chairman Hundt and Wireless Telecommunications Bureau Chief Michelle Farquhar represented the FCC. In opening remarks, Chairman Hundt commented:

> ***This country of ours is a country of dreamers and doers. The dream I have is that the FCC is going to do just what you conclude we should do. And I believe that all the dreams of everyone here can be accomplished if you work together in good faith and if you spend the time tackling the hard issues. . . .There should be no issue about the willingness of everyone here to find solutions to the problem of compatibility. And I believe that there are no disputes about the willingness to find solutions. Because of that, I'm positive that you will find solutions.***

Chairman Hundt is awarded the Helen Keller Outstanding Public Service Award by the American Foundation for the Blind for establishing the DITF, March 1996

The first year of the Disabilities Issues Task Force came full circle in March 1996, when Chairman Hundt again appeared before the American Foundation for the Blind. Chairman Hundt and Senator Howell Heflin of Alabama, a long-time advocate for persons with visual disabilities, were honored with the Helen Keller Outstanding Public Service Award at the Washington National Cathedral. Accepting this honor on behalf of

the Commission and the Disabilities Issues Task Force, Chairman Hundt remarked:

> ***I'm sure that if Helen Keller were here today, she would be faxing me, knocking on my door, or walking the FCC hallways advocating for equality for all persons with disabilities. And I'd be happy to see her. I'd like your advice as to how we can best implement the new telecommunications law. We need your input now more than ever. Give us some guidance. Tell us how we can do things right. We aim to give everyone the tools to help them reach their goals.***

CONTINUING AND FUTURE TASK FORCE INITIATIVES

Disabilities World Wide Web Home Page

The Public Affairs working group of the DITF has constructed a "Disabilities Home Page" on the FCC World Wide Web (WWW) page. In addition to timely information on Commission rulemakings impacting disability access, and links to all Commission documents and information, the Disabilities Home Page contains information about the Task Force, frequently asked questions (FAQs) about disability issues, and monthly "hot topics."

Notice of Inquiry on Improving TRS

A Notice of Inquiry is scheduled for June of 1996, as part of the Commission's continuing obligation to monitor the provision of Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) and ensure that TRS takes advantage of current technology and network capabilities. The Commission views TRS as an evolving and flexible program, which should never become "entrenched" into one type of technology, but should constantly move towards the goal of functionally equivalent access to the telephone network by persons with hearing and speech disabilities. The Notice of Inquiry will focus on: video relay interpreting (VRI), which uses PC video conferencing equipment and ISDN lines so that people who are deaf can use the relay service in their natural mode of communication (i.e., sign language or lipreading); speech-to-speech relay services, for people with severe speech disabilities and voice synthesizer users; and multilingual TRS services. Comment on other ways to improve TRS will also be requested.

The Commission is also considering the use of an abbreviated dialing code, or N11 code, a three-digit code that would access all nationwide TRS centers.

Universal Service and Networking America's Classrooms

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 contains historic universal service requirements which will benefit all Americans. These provisions seek to ensure that, among other

things, low- income populations, customers in rural, insular and high-cost areas, and health care facilities will be able to obtain essential telecommunications services at just, reasonable and affordable rates. The 1996 Act also contains language which is geared at networking America's classrooms and libraries at discounted rates, which would provide a crucial educational "jump-start" into the twenty-first century. All of these provisions have potential benefits for people with disabilities, as well as the general population.

Pursuant to the 1996 Act, a Federal-State Joint Board has been convened to lay out the parameters of universal service, and the Commission's Common Carrier Bureau has initiated a rulemaking on universal service. The Joint Board will be making many important decisions, such as what services must be provided through universal service, what are "affordable rates," and what support mechanisms should be used to fund universal service. The Disabilities Issues Task Force also will work with the Commission's newly created Education Task Force, to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are addressed in the Commission's educational initiatives.

Accessibility of Commission Resources and Facilities

In 1995-96, the Commission dramatically increased the availability of FCC information and dockets through its World Wide Web (WWW) Home Page on the Internet. The FCC Home Page has grown explosively over the past year, and nearly every Bureau and Office makes its documents and press releases accessible via the Internet. The Internet provides instant access for persons with disabilities, and transcends many architectural and communication barriers historically encountered by persons with disabilities in their efforts to obtain timely information from Federal agencies.

The Internet, and graphical user interface (GUI) software in general, however, are not always "user-friendly" for people with visual disabilities. The Commission, therefore, has been gathering input from members of the blind and visually-impaired communities to ensure that its electronic information resources, to the maximum extent possible, afford access to people with visual disabilities. Furthermore, DITF members and staff from the Commission's Office of the Managing Director (OMD) have been consulting with Commission document contractors and Reference Room staff on how to provide docket information in accessible formats. The Commission will make every effort to ensure that all Americans, disabled or non-disabled, can obtain information they need from the Commission and its contractors, so that all segments of the public will have an equal opportunity to participate in Commission proceedings.

DITF members and OMD staff have also been conducting an intensive survey of Commission offices and facilities for accessibility, with the intent to develop and publish a formal "Accessibility Handbook" for the use of all Commission staff. The availability of TTYs has been inspected, as well as the physical accessibility of Commission buildings and parking garages. The Commission has received considerable input from all segments of the disability population, and other Federal agencies, on how it can make its facilities and resources more accessible.

Finally, the Commission plans to develop a video to educate Commission staff about disability access issues and about disability-related initiatives which the Commission has undertaken. In addition to interviews with Working Group leaders, the video will also contain information and demonstrations of technologies commonly used by persons with disabilities to achieve access to telecommunications, such as Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS). This video is an important step in the Commission's continuing efforts to become the most "disabilities-friendly" Commission possible.

Continuing the Implementation of The Telecommunications Act of 1996

As the second year of the Disabilities Issues Task Force begins, the Commission is moving forward with the implementation of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Implementation of the disability access sections of this Act - in particular, Section 255 (accessible equipment and services) and Section 713 (closed-captioning and video description) - will be the focus of the DITF's sophomore year. The Task Force looks forward to another highly productive year, and will continue its work towards "building bridges" between the disability community and the telecommunications industry.

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